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Costa Gavras: Beyond Labels

By Lewis H. Diuguid

SANTIAGO—"There is a lot of liberty in Chile," said Costa Gavras, the director of politically provocative movies. There was enough for him to film "State of Siege" here, but just barely.

Costa Gavras previously had infuriated the world's dictators, and particularly those of his native Greece, with "Z." Likewise, he insulted Stalinists and agitated other Communists with the showing of "The Confession."

Now "State of Siege" has convulsed all sectors of Chile's broad political spectrum. And the film is not quite finished as yet. And it does not have to do with Chile, anyway.

Costa Gavras

Gavras, at 39 the leader of the political film movement, offered an interview in ITT's Sheraton Carrera Hotel, a sanctuary from the slings of the Chilean right and the arrows of the left.

"State of Siege," he explained, is a story of neocolonialism, of advisers from rich countries who seek to impose their own systems and values on the countries they "aid." The events of the film derive roughly from the execution by Uruguay's Tupamaros of U.S. police adviser Dan Mitrione in 1970. Yves Montand, leading man in Gavras' previous movies, plays the approximation of Mitrione.

"But this is not *the* case of Mitrione," Gavras insisted. "We do not really know that case, although we know some of it. Montand is a high functionary who is kidnaped. But we use no names."

The locale is not defined, either, beyond its being in Latin America. But the movie had to be made somewhere. Chile, as the freest country with at least a rudimentary film industry necessary to support the production, was the only choice. But as the most highly politicized nation, it hardly turned out to be ideal.

Critics on the right maintained "State of Siege" was financed by the Tupamaros (most of the money is American). Uruguay's ambassador protested diplomatically. The left accused Gavras of unrevolutionary commercialism.

Part of the problem was that Gavras' politics do not fit under any of the ideological labels that define politics here.

Gavras said he has never associated with any movement, that his character would not permit it.

"My friends accuse me of being an aggressive independent. I don't know if a society can organize itself around people such as me, but . . ." He punctuated the phrase with a take-it-or-leave-it shrug that Santiago's half-dozen brands of socialists find so disconcerting.

"The trouble with political parties is that they deal in simplifications. None is as perfect as its advocates say."

What, then, is the basis of his own philosophy?

"The dignity of man, fundamentally. Justice. I cannot accept that some men go hungry. I cannot accept that some live very well while others live very poorly . . . I am not a Christian but I accept the ideal, 'to love thy neighbor as thyself.' All the enormous quantity of words today makes this ideal seem old-fashioned, but it is my philosophy."

Costa Gavras, actually Constantine Gavras, is a laxed and intense. He grew up in postwar Greece, where the air was thick with the themes that would later dominate his films: Stalinism, anticommunism, U.S. aid, military rule, civil strife.

In 1953, Gavras left Greece for the Sorbonne in Paris. "But literature and philosophy did not get to the issues," he said. So after three years he turned to studies for television and the movies, and he then worked in those fields.

After 14 years in France, Gavras returned briefly to Greece in 1967—as it happened, just before the military coup. He had picked up the "Z" book describing the death of Greek rebel leader Lambrakis at the hands of the military, and the coup that soon followed gave it an instant relevance.

Argentina, whose military regime usually imposes a rigid movie censorship, was allowed to see "Z." Gavras explained that the film had just received a big reception at the Mar del Plata film festival and the distributor seized that moment to ask approval in Buenos Aires. It worked. Several Argentines who saw the picture said they felt it was describing their own dictatorship, the only incongruity being the fact that they were there seeing it.

According to Gavras, Donald Ruggof of Cinema Five in New York paid about $600,000 on the gamble that the show would succeed there. It did, bringing in $10 million.

With that, American financiers were interested in political movies. It was 1968, and the throttling of the Prague spring was on the public mind. Gavras and Montand turned to "The

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